

Chapter 2

The Truman Family

Introduction

Anderson Shipp and Mary Jane Holmes Truman

John and Martha Ellen Truman

Harry Truman Childhood Years on the Young Farm

The Young Farm During the Truman's Absence, 1890 - 1905

The Trumans Return to the Young Farm

The Truman Family

Part 1, Chapter 2

Introduction

This chapter presents the Truman family, including an overview of Harry Truman's parents, his birth, and the life up to 1907. It follows the trials and tribulations of John Anderson Truman from successful stock trader to losing everything. Harry's siblings are introduced: his brother, Vivian, and his sister, Mary Jane. The reminiscences of a neighbor provide some insight into the family members.

Anderson Shipp and Mary Jane Holmes Truman

The story of John Anderson Truman, future father of a United States President, is another story of a westward migration out of Shelby County Kentucky into western Missouri. His parents, Anderson Shipp Truman and Mary Jane Holmes, were born to pioneers. Mary Jane Holmes moved to Missouri with her sixty-year-old mother, Nancy Tyler Holmes, a widow. The widow Holmes was the single parent of seven daughters and three sons when she made the trek from Kentucky to Missouri. Mary Jane returned to Kentucky in 1845 when she was twenty-four years old. A year later, on August 13, 1846, she would marry the thirty-three-year-old Anderson Shipp Truman in Christiansburg, Kentucky. In the fall of that year, the couple would move to Missouri.

Anderson and Mary Jane Truman were reportedly a "well-fixed" young couple in Missouri. Mary Jane's mother, Nancy Holmes, had given the couple some slaves as a wedding present, they purchased a two-hundred-acre farm near Westport Landing, and Anderson served as the school director for four years. On December 5, 1851, John Anderson Truman was born to this couple. This child who would father Harry S Truman, was the third of five children born to Mary Jane and Anderson. In the spring of 1853, Anderson and Mary Jane moved north to Platte County, Missouri, where a southern plantation economy had evolved around tobacco and hemp.⁴⁶ At the time of this move, Margaret Ellen, future aunt of the president, was four years old, and John, future father of the president, was one. The family stayed there for thirteen years, and unlike the Youngs and residents of Jackson County, the Trumans lived comparatively tranquil lives throughout the Civil War.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Jonathan Daniels, *The Man of Independence* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1950), 59.

⁴⁷ *Kansas City Times*, 29 January 1892.

After the Civil War, both the Youngs and the Trumans returned to Jackson County and settled near what would become Grandview. Solomon continued his freighting business, and Anderson Shipp Truman worked a 200-acre farm.

John and Martha Ellen Truman

The mother and father of the future president, John Anderson Truman and Martha Ellen Young, lived on neighboring farms when they met. They married in 1881, and moved to Lamar, Missouri, 120 miles south of Kansas City. Harry S Truman⁴⁸ was born on May 8, 1884. The future president's birth was not published in the local newspaper, the *Lamar Democrat*. That event was pre-empted by an advertisement placed by the new baby's father, and an announcement that a local resident had graduated from a technical training program. The baby's father advertised, "Wanted, a few good mules and horses. Will pay highest cash prices for same. J. A. Truman, White barn near Missouri Pacific depot." The paper that day also reported that Hoyt Humphrey had graduated from an embalming class, and noted that, "Hoyt is thorough in anything he undertakes."⁴⁹ At the time of Harry S Truman's birth, his parents occupied a small twenty-by-twenty-eight-foot frame house. It had four rooms downstairs and two on the second floor. His father, John Anderson Truman, traded horses, mules, cows, pigs, and sheep. He traded the horses and mules locally; the other livestock went to stockyards or slaughterhouses.

A year after Harry's birth, the Trumans left Lamar. They lived briefly on a farm near Harrisonville, moved to a seventy-one-acre farm southeast of Belton known as the Dye farm, and, in 1887, moved to the Young farm where they helped Solomon and Harriet work their acreage. Harry Truman's parents had two other children. John Vivian was born in 1886 and Mary Jane was born in 1889.

⁴⁸ From a letter to Dr. Fabrikant from Harry S Truman, August 6, 1962, "I never use anything but the "S", sometimes with a period when I am in a hurry and not thinking about it, but it is a name and not an initial and does not need punctuation after it." See also letter to Miss McNees from Harry S Truman, June 17, 1964. "It is a capital "S" with no period." Harry S. [sic] Truman Library, Post Presidential Files, Box 1, Family Correspondence Files, File: Harry S.[sic] Truman Initial "S".

⁴⁹ Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: His Life on the Family Farm* (Worland, Wyo.: High Plains Publishing Co., 1991), 39.

The Truman Family
Part 1, Chapter 2



Martha and John Truman. Harry S Truman's Parents.
Photo courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library

Harry Truman Childhood Years on the Young Farm

The Young Farm of the late 1880s, where Harry Truman spent a few impressionable years of his youth, was a wonderland of cultivated fields, grazing meadows, hedgerows, ponds, and groves of trees, all waiting to be explored by the young Truman boy. The turned-earth smells of spring, the cold brilliance of fall, and the cornstalk-crackling heat of summer saw Harry Truman tagging along behind father, or grandfather, his mother or grandmother, to be imprinted with farming scenes he would recall throughout his life. Years later, in 1949, he spoke of his grandfather Young taking him by cart, pulled by a strawberry roan horse, six miles to the Cass County Fair at Belton, Missouri. They went each day for six days. Five-year-old Harry sat next to his Grandfather in the judges' stand as horse races were called. He would also recall years later the Shetland pony his father gave him, and the time his father made him walk home after falling from the pony.⁵⁰

Harry had a bobtailed Maltese gray cat, Bob, and a small black-and-tan dog, Tandy, who would tag after Harry during his farm explorations. The young Harry Truman spent hours watching Bob and Tandy team up to catch field mice in the cornfields. Sometimes the trio would simply wander through the 440 acres immediately adjacent to the farm house, or the 160 acres to the west across the road. They watched the cattle, the horses, the mules, or the sheep laze in the pasture. They saw wheat harvests, wheat threshing, corn shucking, and the mowing and stacking of hay. They arced high in the backyard swing hung from an old elm tree, and during stormy weather they moved to the swing inside the house in the downstairs hall. And, when they tired of swinging on those gray, inclement days, they could play on the long porch along the north side of the house where a hammock made of barrel staves was hung.⁵¹ When Solomon Young's half sister visited the farm from her home in St. Louis, she would take the boys out into the back pasture, where they would wander through the tall prairie grass in search of birds' nests, daisies, prairie wild flowers, and wild strawberries.⁵²

Apples and peaches were gathered on crisp fall days at the Young Farm. The peaches were dried and the apples buried.⁵³

⁵⁰ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Vol. I, Year of Decision*. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), 27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵³ Apples were harvested in the fall and placed in a hole dug in well-drained ground where they were covered with a layer of straw that was then covered with boards. The nearly constantly cool temperature below ground would preserve the

The Truman Family

Part 1, Chapter 2

The fruits were made into pies throughout the winter. The Youngs' kitchen also produced peach butter, apple butter, grape butter, jellies and preserves, during cold winter days, all cooked by Harriet Young, Martha Truman, and a hired woman from Germany.

After the first fall freeze, the hogs were slaughtered. Sausages, souse, pickled pigs' feet, and hams filled the basement and smokehouse.⁵⁴ Lard was rendered in a big iron kettle mounted on long steel legs and placed inside the smokehouse.

Although the farm of Truman's childhood was a sprawling 1,600-acre spread, much of that land was used as pasture for livestock and was not cultivated. Approximately thirty feet behind the two-story house that Solomon built, was a one-story utility building resting on a brick foundation. Further east, approximately three hundred feet down a gently sloping field, was a massive fifty-by-sixty-foot barn.⁵⁵ Much of the timber used to construct the barn, including thick walnut beams and the barns siding, came from the old mill built in 1854 by Edward A. Hickman. Some reports indicate that lumber from a bridge over the Blue River that had been badly damaged in a flood was also used. George Kemper was apparently the carpenter who constructed the barn in 1868 for Solomon and Harriet.⁵⁶

Not only had the Young farm been transformed by the labors of Solomon and Harriet, the very nature of farming had changed. It had been transformed from a subsistence operation to a commercial activity. Not only had farming technology advanced, but also national and international transportation had improved. The railroads had reached west of the Mississippi River, and ocean transport had been revolutionized. The invention of the double-expansion or compound marine engine reduced the on-board area needed for the vessels' power plant, freeing space for additional cargo. In addition to making more on-board space available for cargo, the construction of much larger ships became possible. The use of the new Kelly-Bessemer steel-making processes made steel affordable for ship construction, and steel ships could be built much larger than wooden vessels.

The Truman family left the Young farm in 1890, when Harry was six years old. They moved to Independence, Missouri,

apples through much of the winter. The apples were dug up during the winter and baked into pies or cobblers.

⁵⁴ The smokehouse was located where the garage is situated now (October 2000). Fred L. Truman, interview by James H. Williams, 18 June 1991, transcript of typed interview, Harry S. Truman Library.

⁵⁵ Robert T. Bray, Robert T. *Archaeological Survey and Testing at the Truman Farm Home and Grounds, Grandview, Missouri*, 1983, typescript, Harry S Truman National Historic Site.

⁵⁶ Truman, *Memoirs*, 119.

where their three children could attend what the parents perceived as better schools.⁵⁷ The Trumans lived in Independence for an eventful thirteen years. Harry Truman graduated from high school in 1901, committed himself to piano lessons, and dreamed of a life as a professional musician. (See Exhibit A for the chronology of Harry S Truman's formal education.)

Although born left-handed, Harry became ambidextrous, since he was taught to write using his right hand.⁵⁸ Morton Chiles, a childhood friend, would recall years later that neighborhood boys called Harry a sissy:

I'm ashamed to admit it now, but we used to call Harry a sissy. He wore glasses and didn't play our games. He carried books, and we'd carry a baseball bat. So we called him a sissy.⁵⁹

Diphtheria struck both Harry and his brother Vivian, and Mary Jane was sent to the Young farm to protect her from the disease. John Anderson Truman continued his animal brokerage business from lots next to their house. He successfully invested in several financial ventures. Then, in 1903, a large wheat futures investment turned bad, and he lost everything, including land his wife had inherited from Solomon Young.

The Trumans then moved to Kansas City, where they lived at 2108 Park Avenue. John Anderson worked as a watchman at a grain elevator. In 1905, John and Martha traded the Park Avenue property for eighty acres of farmland in Henry County and moved to Clinton, Missouri, to farm it. Harry S Truman and Vivian stayed in Kansas City working for a bank. They roomed at 1314 Troost Avenue, paying \$5 a week for room and board (which included breakfast and dinner). Weekends the brothers went home to Clinton. John Truman had planted his eighty acres near Clinton in corn, but his luck had not improved: the Grand River flooded, destroying his crop.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid., 114.

⁵⁸ Edward W. Potts, "The President's Mother," *The Christian Advocate*, Winter 1945, 10.

⁵⁹ Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S Truman* (New York: Berkley Publishing Co., 1973), 51.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 124.

The Truman Family

Part 1, Chapter 2

The Trumans Return to the Young Farm

In late 1905 or early 1906, the parents moved back to the Young farm, where they would remain. Vivian joined them shortly thereafter. Harry remained in Kansas City for another year, working for the bank, before he, too, returned to the farm of his mother's parents. (See Exhibit B for the chronology of Harry S Truman residences between his birth and 1906.)

By the time Harry Truman returned to the farm in 1906-07 as a young man of twenty-two, human and farm-animal muscle were still primarily responsible for crop production, but the potential market for those crops had increased dramatically. It was the golden age of agriculture. Demand for farm products was high and the national and international transportation enabled the farmer to supply that demand.⁶¹

The time Harry Truman spent on his maternal grandparents farm from 1907 until he left for the First World War, was not only a glorious time for farming in America, it was also a time on the Young farm we know a great deal about. Not only were events documented by letters Harry Truman wrote to his future wife, but others who knew him and his family during that period would later reminisce about the Youngs and Trumans during those early farming years. Gaylon Babcock, a friend of the Trumans who lived on a farm northeast of the Truman-Young farm at that time, would report years later that Harry's mother was rather short and caustic, even perhaps a little sarcastic. During harvest times, Babcock recalled, Mrs. Truman would not help in the dining room or kitchen. Harry and Mary Jane prepared food for neighbors who were helping with the Truman harvest, and Harry and Mary Jane served it.⁶²

Babcock was also able to provide some definition to the character of Vivian Truman, Harry's brother. During his oral history interview, Babcock recalled an incident that took place in the early 1900s:

⁶¹ Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: His Life on the Family Farm*, 63.

⁶² Some writers have discounted Babcock's credibility, arguing he was biased against Harry Truman because of an alleged unpaid loan. However, during the interview upon which the above text is based, Babcock praises Harry Truman for his organizational skills: "Yes, yes, I think he's a pretty good organizer. He could do better at organizing and handling people like that than Vivian could, even though I liked Vivian much better and his father better than all the rest of them. Gaylon Babcock, interview by James R. Fuchs, 12 February 1964, transcript of taped interview, Harry S. Truman Library. Babcock offered such praise notwithstanding his obvious annoyance that a debt was not paid by Harry Truman, which Babcock thought was a valid debt, argues strongly for Babcock being a much more objective witness than other writers maintain.

The Truman Family
Part 1, Chapter 2

FUCHS [Interviewer]: Do you recall anything about the Ku Klux Klan?

BABCOCK: I remember about the Ku Klux Klan. I remember about it, but not in connection with Harry. I do remember this. They held a meeting in the lodge hall in Hickman Mills; notices were sent out that there would be an interesting meeting and inviting all the citizenry around there to attend. And, the notice was worded in such a way that it would create your interest. There had been talk on Ku Klux Klan prior to that around there, and you could have some reason to believe that maybe it would be a Ku Klux, but we didn't know it necessarily. I did go to that meeting. Vivian Truman and I sat together at that meeting. When the men who opened the meeting got up to explain what their meeting was about, they said if there were any foreign-born people there, and any non-Protestants there, which I took to mean Catholics, or any husband who had a wife that was non-Protestant, meaning Catholic, and a few more qualifications, they would suggest that they leave the room. Well, immediately, a bunch of us left, and Vivian and I were together and we left.⁶³



Vivian and Luella Truman. Harry S Truman's brother and sister-in-law.

Photo courtesy of Harry S. Truman Library

Born on April 25, 1886, Vivian Truman had little interest in formal education, preferring instead to work with livestock and crops. Although he didn't finish high school, his father had enough confidence in him that he provided him with his own checkbook at age twelve, and Vivian actively participated with his father as a stock trader. Ultimately, Vivian Truman was to

⁶³ Babcock interview, 12 February 1964.

The Truman Family

Part 1, Chapter 2

become a career farmer and would have children, two of whom would follow in the footsteps of their father and their father's father to farm the land. These two sons, Harry and Gilbert, would recall years later that their father loved farming and being around cattle. He continued helping Harry and Gilbert farm the land until his death.⁶⁴

In October of 1911, Harry Truman reported in a letter to Elizabeth Wallace (Bess), his future wife, that Vivian had rented a farm and was getting married.⁶⁵ On October 28, 1911, Vivian married Luella Campbell, a redhead who was described by Truman as more like his grandmother, Harriet Young, than any person he knew.⁶⁶ The couple would have five children: John Custis and Callie Louise (fraternal twins), Fred Leland, Martha Ann, Harry Arnold, and Gilbert Vivian. Callie would die as a child in 1915.

After their marriage, Vivian and Luella lived on farms in Belton, Grandview, and Hickman Mills. They moved to a farm on the eastern border of the Young-Truman Grandview farm in 1927. In 1930 they built a home, just north of the Truman farm home, which remained the Vivian Truman family home for many years to come.⁶⁷

Luella Truman was a member of the Hickman Mills Community Church, which she joined in 1895; she also was an organizer of the Hickman Mills Old Settlers Club, and a member of the Grandview Study Club. Luella died on March 8, 1978, at the age of ninety, leaving eleven grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren. She was buried in Mount Moriah Cemetery.⁶⁸ Vivian died on July 8, 1965, at the age of seventy-nine.⁶⁹

Babcock also related his recollection of other members of the Young and Truman families. Harry Truman's uncle, Harrison Young, Babcock recalled as being quick tempered and prideful, Harry's sister, Mary Truman, he reported was his favorite of the three Truman children. Babcock felt that Harry's father, John Truman, would go out of his way to make people feel good about themselves. He would often compliment people.

Yes, and, if you did a good job, he would compliment you. In a crowd, he tried to make it easy for everyone. Instead of not noticing maybe a water hauler or a child, he would notice them. And if you did a good job,

⁶⁴ Harry and Gilbert Truman, interview by Jon Taylor, 20 September 1996, transcript of tape interview, Harry S Truman National Historic Site.

⁶⁵ Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Dear Bess: The Letters from Harry to Bess Truman, 1910-1959* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 52.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁶⁷ Fred L. Truman interview, June 18, 1991.

⁶⁸ *Independence Examiner*, 9 March 1978.

⁶⁹ *Lincoln Star*, 9 July 1965.

he would compliment them [sic]. He made you want to do a good job. That's Mr. Truman.⁷⁰

Harry Truman's father, John Anderson Truman, was not only a stockbroker (in the true sense), a farmer, and a deacon in the Blue Ridge Baptist Church, he was also an inventor. He patented a reel for the deployment of wire used in barbed-wire fences⁷¹ and a staple-puller used for barbed wire.⁷² He also invented a railroad switch.

Harry Truman related an anecdote regarding his father that adds a personal dimension to the man. "If my father's honor was impugned," Harry is reported to have said, "he'd fight like a buzzsaw."⁷³ Harry Truman reported that on one occasion his father was seated on the witness stand, testifying in Judge James H. Slover's Independence courtroom. At the conclusion of his cross-examination, the attorney leaned toward John Truman and said, "Now, John, you know that's a damn lie!" John Truman sprang from the witness chair and pursued the offending attorney as he fled the courtroom. Upon John Truman's return to the courtroom, Judge Slover is reported to have leaned over the bench and asked, "Did you get him, John?"

"No, he got away. He ran inside a building across the street."

"Too bad," Slover said. "That fellow really had a good beating coming to him."⁷⁴

At the time of John Truman's death, he confided in friends who were visiting him on his deathbed that he felt like a failure. His friends tried to dissuade him and later reported that in their opinion he had been a great success.⁷⁵ Local schools were closed in tribute on the day of John Truman's funeral.

⁷⁰ Babcock interview, 12 February 1964.

⁷¹ Patent No. 438,718, serial number 349,855, dated October 21, 1890.

⁷² Serial number 370,194, dated April 2, 1891.

⁷³ Harry Truman as quoted by Alfred Steinberg, *The Man From Missouri: The Life and Times of Harry S. Truman* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1962), 17.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷⁵ Stephen S. Slaughter, *History of a Missouri Farm Family: The O. V. Slaughters, 1700-1944* (Harrison, N.Y.: Harbor Hill, 1978), 81.

The Truman Family
Part 1, Chapter 2
